DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 139 PS 019 757

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TITLE Should Developmental Psychologists Take Seriously the Hermeneutic Critique?
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Developmental Psychology; *Epistemology; *Hermeneutics; *Scientific Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Objectivity; *Subjectivity; Theoretical Analysis; Theory Development

ABSTRACT

Most developmental psychologists have encountered some version of the hermeneutic critique. Hermeneuticists assert that the traditional conception of social science research is fundamentally flawed in methodology, in its conception of the human person and human action, and in epistemology. Hermeneuticists maintain that hermeneutics should revolutionize psychological and educational research. How seriously should this argument be taken? First, consider the methodological argument. It has been claimed that hermeneutic inquiry calls in a unique way for analyses that are both perspectival and contextual. But such analyses are central to many developmental psychologists' research programs. Evidently, hermeneutics will not revolutionize psychological research methods. Now consider the epistemological argument. Hermeneuticists recognize that the understanding of human action requires detailed analyses of subjective psychological states; that knowledge of human subjectivity is valid; and that intersubjectivity, and not an objective foundation, establishes the validity of an interpretation. But acceptance of hermeneuticists' assumptions about subjective psychological states does not require developmentalists to abandon objective, truth-oriented theory. While developmental psychology can draw on the hermeneutic tradition to enrich qualitative methods and analyses, developmentalists should not accept any critique seeking to undermine the discipline's epistemic foundation as a social science. (RH)

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Should Developmental Psychologists Take Seriously

the Hermeneutic Critique?

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Most of us have encountered some version of the hermeneutic critique. In brief, the critique is that we as developmental psychologists have it wrong to the extent we draw methodologically and epistemologically from the natural sciences. That is, we are largely misguided if we set up controlled experiments, make and test experimental hypotheses, characterize the structure or organization of human thought, or, in particular, seek to establish theories that we believe move toward some form of an objective truth.

For instance, at the last SRCD meeting in Kansas City, Jerome Bruner (1989) said:

> The first and most ferocious [of my preconceptions] is that I do not believe that there ever will be or can be one sole and unitary way of understanding human nature, its variations, its settings, or its growth. No theory can ever be THE true theory...for anything we choose to characterize as human nature occurs in a setting and under the thrall of a way of knowing and is a product of that setting and that thrall. (p. 2)

Thus, according to Bruner, there is no possible way to provide true theories, but only interpretations that depend on the theorist's context and culture.

Elsewhere, the philosopher Charles Taylor (1985) argues that "prediction...cannot be a goal for social science as it is of natural science" (p. 48). Instead, the social sciences need to study -- through interpretative methods -- "the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality" (p. 52). Of course, for Taylor these interpretations (like any good story) "must have sense or coherence" (p. 24). But because, in Taylor's words, man is a self-interpreting animal, "there is no such thing as the structure of meaning for him [man] independently of his interpretations of them" (p. 26). In other words, while stories can be better or worse, they can't be true or false.

Thus -- with Bruner and Taylor as but brief examples -- we're challenged by the hermeneutic critique. In its broadest statement, the critique is that the traditional conception of

social scientific research is fundamentally flawed -- in its methodology, conception of human persons and human action, and epistemology. Moreover, it is claimed by some (e.g., see Soltis, 1990) that hermeneutics should revolutionize psychological and educational research. Well should it? In other words, How seriously should we take the hermeneutic critique?

Now, a full assessment of the validity of hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this talk. Indeed, for purposes today I want to side-step a good deal of the rich philosophical tradition of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Ricoeur, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953; and others) and focus more on how that tradition is translated to us by theorists interested in social science research (Barrell, Aanstoos, Richards, & Arons, 1987; Blee & Billings, 1986; Freeman, 1984; Hekman, 1984; Honey, 1987; Overvold, 1985; Packer, 1985a, 1988; Tappan, 1989, 1990, and others). Within this context, there are two central concerns I want to raise about the hermeneutic critique. The first involves methodology, the second epistemology.

Taking the methodological concern. Typically, it is claimed (e.g., Packer, 1985a; Barrel et al., 1987) that hermeneutic inquiry uniquely calls for analyses that are both perspectival and contextual: perspectival in the sense that different perspectives of a situation are allowed for and assessed; contextual in the sense that human actions occur and gain meaning in social contexts. And if I had more time today I could point to hermeneutical research (e.g., Packer, 1985b) to illustrate both types of analyses. But my point is that both perspectival and contextual analyses are central to research programs conducted by numerous developmental psychologists.

For example, consider one aspect of Saxe's research on the development of mathematical reasoning: Saxe (1987, in press) goes to Brazil and observes Brazilian children candy sellers in the context of their selling candy; moreover he interviews these children on their mathematical practices, and takes into account how the meaning of children's social practices partly depend on cultural context. Thus Saxe takes seriously both context and perspectives. Or consider one aspect of a research program by DeVries on early childhood education. In a recent study,

DeVries and Zan (1990) investigated young children's understanding of shadow phenomena. Their video-taped data includes (a) students interacting with shadow phenomena in the context of an actual educational activity, (b) students interacting with other students and teachers, and (c) teachers questioning the children about their understanding in the context of the activity. Thus DeVries, too, takes seriously both context and perspectives. Or consider current research by Turiel (in preparation) who is analyzing relations between children's social judgments and action. His data set includes months of naturalistic observations of children's classroom practices, and observations of specific interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, for specific conflicts, both participants and bystanders are interviewed on their understandings of the conflicts, and then interviewed several weeks later on hypothetical situations. Again, both context and perspective. Finally, consider the guiding theme of Rogoff's (1990) research:

> ...that individual effort and sociocultural activity are mutually embedded, as are the forest and the trees, and that it is essential to understand how they constitute each other. Rather than according primacy to the role of sociocultural activity or of the individual, the aim is to recognize the essential and inseparable roles of societal heritage, social engagement, and individual efforts. (p. 25)

For all these researchers -- and many I didn't name (Friedman, 1988; Gilligan, 1982; Helwig, 1989; Laupa, 1989; Lave, 1988; Nucci, 1986; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Smetana, 1989; and still many others) -- analyses are both perspectival and contextual: perspectival in the sense that different perspectives of a situation are allowed for and assessed; contextual in the sense that human actions occur and gain meaning in social contexts.

Because perspectival and contextual methods advocated by hermeneuticists can be found within current developmental research programs, I don't see how hermeneutics will revolutionize psychological research methods. With that said, however, I do think that hermeneutics can help advance the qualitative methods of developmental psychology, and can help perhaps make such qualitative methods more compelling to those in the field of experimental psychology.

So, my first concern has been methodological. Turning now to my second concern of epistemology. Hermeneuticists sometimes confound two types of issues: one pertains to their

chosen unit of study, the other to their epistemology. In abbreviated form, the problem occurs as follows: First hermeneuticists (I think successfully) argue that understanding human action requires detailed analyses of subjective psychological states: of reasons, motives, and desires. Of human agency. Of what Searle (1983) would call Intentionality with the big "I". For instance, taking a standard hermeneutic example (Phillips, 1990; Soltis, 1990), presumably an answer to why Caesar crossed the Rubicon includes some consideration of Caesar's subjective political ambitions. But in various ways it is then often assumed that if knowledge about human subjectivity is valid, it therefore must follow that valid knowledge is subjective in the epistemic sense that there exists no objective foundation (but only inter-subjective criteria) by which to establish the validity of an interpretation. But such a conclusion confuses the idea of subjectivity as the chosen unit of psychological analysis with subjectivity as an epistemic claim.

To clarify this idea, it will help if I turn briefly to a case in point. In an article in the journal Human Development, Freeman (1984) says

> "Because the data of narration derive from experience, the idea of development can only be placed within the realm of subjectivity...[T]here is no external criterion with which some 'final objectivity' could be established; all we can do is try to decipher the dialectic at hand -- and then, narrate it." (p. 16)

But here is the problem. One could agree that narrations or interpretations derive from experience, and that the idea of development brings with it the idea of subjectivity in the non-epistemic sense that to understand development we must seek to understand subjective psychological states of people. But it does not follow that to take seriously subjective psychological states that "the idea of development can only be placed within the realm of subjectivity" in the epistemic sense that there exists no "final objectivity." For one could agree with the same assumptions about subjective psychological states but place the idea of development within the realm of an objective, truth-oriented theory. Indeed, many of the developmental theorists I noted earlier (e.g., Saxe, DeVries, and Turiel) do just that. Thus my point is this: in the hermeneutic critique of the

social sciences, the idea of subjectivity as the chosen unit of psychological analysis is sometimes mistakenly used to argue for subjectivity as an epistemic claim.

So, where does this leave us in understanding the hermeneutic critique? Should we take the critique seriously? D.E. Linge (1977) can help me frame my answer. In his introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics (where Linge is characterizing Gadamer's position), Linge says

> ...the differentiation between methodological sterility and genuine understanding is imagination, that is, the capacity to see what is questionable in the subject matter and to formulate questions that question the subject matter further. And the precondition of this capacity is that one is open to be questioned by the text, to be provoked by it to risk involvement in a dialogue that carries him beyond his present position. (p. xxii)

I find this a lovely passage. And I see no reason why developmental psychology need have methodological sterility. I would hope we can take texts seriously: texts in a broad sense that includes human thought, feelings, and practices. I would hope that we can we engage in dialogue with texts, and do so with imagination, open to being provoked beyond our present position.

Thus, in closing, I think we can profit by drawing on the hermeneutic tradition to enrich our qualitative methods and analyses, and to move away from strictly experimental research programs. In this non-epistemological sense, I think we should take the hermeneutic critique seriously. But acceptance of such interpretative methods should not -- certainly by itself -- provide any basis for accepting the stronger part of the critique that seeks to undermine the epistemic foundation of developmental psychology as a social science.

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